

Chapter 1: Into Reconstruction and Out Again

One of the earliest areas settled in southeastern North Carolina, Wilmington, initially known as Newton, was incorporated in 1739 on the banks of the Cape Fear River.¹ During the antebellum years, Wilmington emerged as North Carolina's largest city.² Surrounded by vast acreages of timber and rice plantations, Wilmington boasted an economy fed by naval stores and agricultural interests. The city dominated New Hanover County with most of the county's residents living or working in Wilmington. The port was the state's largest and most active as a result of enterprising railroad construction and the booming turpentine industry.³ Wilmington's importance in the state and region was unmistakable, and, as a result, its interests were in the mainstream and forefront of state social and political affairs.⁴

The End of the Civil War in Wilmington

¹ The chapter title has been borrowed from Andrew Howell, *The Book of Wilmington* (Wilmington, N.C.: by the author, 1930), 150; James Sprunt, *Chronicles of the Cape Fear River, 1660-1916* (Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton, 1916), 45-46.

² The populations of North Carolina's largest towns in 1860 were Wilmington (6,522), New Bern (5,432), Fayetteville (4,790), Raleigh (4,780), Salisbury (2,420), and Charlotte (2,265).

³ The Wilmington and Weldon Railroad, completed in 1840, was the longest in the world at 162 miles between the two destinations. For more on the importance of Wilmington as a port, see Alan D. Watson, *Wilmington, Port of North Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992). Robert B. Outland III, *Tapping the Pines: The Naval Stores Industry in the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 52-54; Tony P. Wren, *Wilmington, North Carolina: An Architectural and Historical Portrait* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1984), 3.

⁴ William McKee Evans, *Ballots and Fence Rails: Reconstruction on the Lower Cape Fear* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 239.

During the Civil War, Wilmington was a vital link in the Confederacy's supply line. The port, under the powerful guns of Fort Fisher, remained open to blockade running traffic for all but the last weeks of the conflict. The fort fell to Union forces in January 1865 after an immense bombardment campaign. The city soon fell when Union forces marched into town on February 22, 1865, leading to a long period of occupation marked by social and economic upheaval.⁵

The occupation of the city was carried out in a relatively smooth transition. The federal commander, General John Schofield, promised that the military would not interfere with local affairs as long as citizens respected U. S. rule. Locals gave Union troops mixed receptions. Some upper-class planters had left the city for inland protection while other former Confederates watched the occupation from behind closed doors. Yet other residents, white and black, welcomed the troops. One observer noted that the "aristocrats" for the most part were quiet as the troops marched in whereas the "commoners" were excited to see the Federal forces. African American residents saw the soldiers as harbingers of good fortune and freedom and eagerly cheered the incoming forces, including approximately 4,000 African American troops.⁶ An officer recalled, "[T]he march

⁵ The city became the most important port to the Confederacy after the siege of Charleston began in 1863. Evans, *Ballots and Fence Rails*, 7; Chris Fonvielle, Jr., *The Wilmington Campaign: Last Rays of Departing Hope*, (Campbell, CA: Savas Publishing Company, 1997), 18.

⁶ Before the war, the city was divided almost equally among pro-Union and secessionist groups. The pro-Union arguments were grounded in both political and economic reasons since merchants didn't want to jeopardize their northern shipping contacts. Fonvielle, *Wilmington Campaign*, 439-441, 459.